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# Progression: Preventing Recidivism through Post-Secondary Education

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## **PROJECT RATIONALE**

**Progression: Preventing Recidivism through Post-Secondary Education**

**Prepared**

**by**

**Frelimo Omari Amili**

**University of Washington Tacoma**

**School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences**

**November 30th, 2016**

**Progression: Preventing Recidivism through Post-Secondary Education**  
**A project rationale submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of**  
**Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies**

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**November 30th, 2016**

## **Abstract**

In the United States of America there are more people incarcerated than in any other developed country. The majority of people released from incarceration become recidivists. Many people who are incarcerated serve their time and return to the same circumstances that led to their incarceration. First time offenders are often released to much worse circumstances because they now have their options in regards to life essentials such as housing and employment limited by a criminal conviction. Despite these unfortunate realities, the potential within many people affected by this vicious cycle can still be reached.

Many researchers have concluded that post-secondary education can have a positive impact on preventing recidivism. Through pursuing an education, formerly incarcerated college students embark on a transformative journey that leads to a reduced risk of becoming a recidivist. In addition to new opportunities for employment, transitioning from prison to college can play a role in reshaping character, identity, and values for the formerly incarcerated.

There are many studies on prison-based college programs but there is very little research in regards to the experiences of students in college post incarceration (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2012). In order to address this gap, the method of inquiry chosen for this project was autoethnography. The result of this project is a workshop and workbook designed to help people transition from prison to college. Workshop participants will be introduced to many key topics regarding the transition from prison to college. Participants will be walked through the process of applying for admission as well as financial aid. They will also be introduced to campus and community resources that can assist them in their transition.

There are ten workshop sessions and 10 related workbook units. The goals and objectives of the workshop and workbook are directly related to the lived experiences uncovered through

the research process. The topics include **The Transformative Nature of Post-Secondary Education, Leaving the Criminal Lifestyle Behind, Community Resources, Academic and Career Options, Financial Aid, College Life, Being a Felon on Campus, Facing Adversity, Doing School Work, and Bringing it all Together**. Within the major topics, each areas of focus is addressed through secondary content that helps reach the workshop objectives.

Keywords: Recidivism, higher education, mass incarceration, autoethnography, workshop.

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## **Introduction**

This project is based on the lived experience of the researcher's transition from being a high school dropout with a general education diploma, who was incarcerated within the Washington State Department of Corrections after being convicted of 30 felonies, to being a successful college student with an Associate's degree, two Bachelor's degrees, and at the conclusion of this project, a Master's degree. The method of data collection for this project was autoethnography and it consisted of personal writing and reflection through journaling and free-writing in addition to gathering various academic documents and interactions from the researcher's time in college. For the purposes of this project, those lived experiences were analyzed with the intent of developing the curriculum for a college preparatory workshop for formerly incarcerated people.

The problems that are being addressed through this project are mass incarceration and recidivism. The United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other nation. There are over 2.2 million people incarcerated in the country and for the majority of them jail or prison will become a revolving door if it has not already (Strayhorn, Johnson & Barrett, 2013). When a person is incarcerated following the conviction of a crime, released, and incarcerated for a new separate conviction they become a recidivist. Over two-thirds of people released from incarceration will return with a new conviction within five years (McTier Jr, 2015).

Scholars have suggested that an effective way to reduce the likelihood of recidivism for people released from prison is through post-secondary education (e.g.; Escobar et al., 2015; Halkovic, 2014; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr, 2015; Spycher, Shkodriani, & Lee, 2012).. However, the majority of such research has focused on prison-based educational programs. Such research also focuses mostly on quantitative data and statistics as opposed to



qualitative analysis of lived experiences. While statistics are good for showing completion rates of programs the stories about the process of completing these programs are missing.

This project began as a response to the lack of qualitative work involving formerly incarcerated college students who pursued their education post-release. Due to issues with accessing formerly incarcerated college students, and the researcher's personal background, autoethnography was chosen as a method to help fill that gap. As progress was made and the research process continued the idea of utilizing autoethnography as a method to provide a qualitative account of the prison-to-college transition was altered to become something much more useful for people making the transition from prison to college in the future. Rather than telling the story of the researcher's lived experience through autoethnography, those experiences were analyzed in order to determine the areas of focus to be included in the curriculum for a college preparatory workshop and workbook for formerly incarcerated people.

Although autoethnography focuses solely on the researcher's personal experiences, these experiences have larger cultural implications. The lived experiences of the researcher are further validated by knowledge and information gathered from secondary sources. This method of data collection and meaning making has validity within the constructivist paradigm which has a relativistic ontology and an epistemology that relies on lived experiences and interpretations (Jonassen, 1991). A relativistic ontology embraces the belief that there is not an objective reality out there to be discovered but rather what we consider to be reality is dependent on our perceptions and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 2001). The constructivist epistemology relies on the interactions and subjectivity of the researcher. Within this paradigm, we are able to come to know things through lived experiences.

Although autoethnography focuses solely on the researcher's personal experiences, those experiences occurred within the complex systems of higher education and within the context of re-integration following incarceration. While individual experiences with transitioning from prison to college may vary, certain processes, resources and information will pertain to a large number of people who are attempting to navigate these complex systems within this context.

In addition to designing the curriculum for a college-preparatory workshop for formerly incarcerated people based on my lived experiences, I have produced a workbook that workshop participants will be given at the start of the course. It is designed to help guide them through a successful transition from being an inmate to being a successful college student. The workbook is designed for participants to write in and keep information all in one place. Several important areas of focus have been identified through the research process and each chapter of the workbook revolves around one major area of focus. There are ten chapters in the workbook which correspond to the ten workshop sessions including an introduction and conclusion.

Areas of focus resulting from the research process include avoiding situations that can lead to re-incarceration, taking advantage of resources both on and off campus, choosing a major, learning admission requirements, learning about the financial aid process and funding options, and college life as a convicted felon which includes the sub-topics of stigma, identity and disclosure of background. There is also information provided about topics such as reading a syllabus, writing papers, taking exams, and overcoming obstacles. While the analysis of the data informs the areas of focus for the project, information provided to participants and content aids were found using various online sources. After identifying areas of focus based on my experiences, the content and instructional aids were compiled using online resources such as FAFSA.gov, StudentLoans.gov, TacomaCC.edu, YouTube, scholarly and non-scholarly articles,

library databases and other sources of information. Personal creativity assists in the delivery of the information in a way that will be useful. There is no step-by-step guide or pre-set way to do this. It is up to the facilitator to be creative in making this workshop as beneficial as possible for participants.

Workshop sessions are designed to be engaging, interactive and progressive. In addition to lecturing and providing information the goal is for participants to actually take steps toward enrolling in college as the workshop progresses. For example, during the session on financial aid participants learn exactly what they need to do in order to apply. After learning what they need to do, they actually fill out the FAFSA before they return for the next session. During the session on the admissions process, participants take steps to gather materials needed and then apply for admission before returning for the next session. Participants might enter the workshop knowing they are interested in attending college but the goal is to take it from an idea to an executable plan for which the first steps have already been taken.

These specific problems were chosen to be addressed through this specific method and project because I want to be able to help people succeed who come from backgrounds that are similar to mine. In this situation I was not only researching the topic at hand but also living it. I have personally experienced the transformative nature of post-secondary education following incarceration. When people have a history of incarceration it can be extremely difficult to live a productive life on the outside due to aggravating barriers. Incarceration is often the result of one's upbringing and despite what many people believe, convicted felons have the potential to re-shape their character, values and identity which in turn makes the world a better place. College is an ideal setting for these transformations to take place.

Formerly incarcerated college students often choose to go into fields in which they help others so there are amazing benefits for society as a whole when post-secondary education becomes an option for this segment of the population. There are also great benefits for classmates of formerly incarcerated college students who may have come from a completely different walk of life. Classroom discussions are enhanced by diversity in experiences and views and formerly incarcerated college students can contribute insights, stories and perspectives that not even the professors can based on their personal experiences. When we educate and provide opportunities to people who were formerly incarcerated we not only reduce the risk of recidivism, but we also increase the knowledge and access to informative perspectives for those who come from more privileged backgrounds.

## **Mass Incarceration, Education and Recidivism**

The intent of the secondary research for this project was to determine the potential impact that post-secondary education can have on preventing recidivism. Several themes have been identified through reviewing literature related to the topic. Amongst the re-occurring themes addressed by scholars are issues of mass incarceration, recidivism, the impact of education, identity development, employment, benefits for others, barriers to success including background checks and stigma, racial disparities, prison-based vs post-release education, and a lack of post-release educational research. The following is a discussion of the themes that emerged.

### **Mass Incarceration**

It is nearly impossible to address recidivism in the United States without first discussing mass incarceration. Many scholars have argued that the United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world (Halkovic, 2014; Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Leary, 2015; McTier Jr, 2015; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2013; Umoh, 2014). The number of prisoners has grown by over 350% since the beginning of the 1980s (Leary, 2015). There are now over 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States (Strayhorn et al., 2013). This amounts to approximately 700 out of every 100,000 United States citizens being incarcerated compared to only 117 per 100,000 in Canada (Umoh, 2014).

According to Strayhorn et al. (2013), nearly half of all inmates are black men. Halkovic & Greene (2015) describe mass incarceration as “the most important civil rights issue of our time” (p. 4). This is especially true because a background that includes incarceration and criminal convictions often leads to a loss of several constitutional rights in addition to very limited opportunities for employment and housing.

## **Recidivism**

Recidivism is defined as either returning to prison or being convicted of a new crime (Severson, Veeh, Bruns, & Lee, 2012). Between 2005 and 2010 data showed that only 32% of people released from prison avoid re-arrest after three years and only 23% avoid re-arrest after five years (McTier Jr, 2015). Due to the lack of better alternatives, many crimes, such as property crimes, committed by formerly incarcerated people are financially motivated (Umoh, 2014). According to Escobar, Jordan, and Lohrasbi (2015), “the cyclical recurrence of recidivism is one factor in the creation of a permanent underclass with no conceivable way to be anything other than poor” (p.32). They believe that recidivism, poverty and the status of being part of a permanent underclass are all cycles of oppression that need to be broken.

According to Livingston and Miller (2014), “there is now strong evidence that racial inequality and reentry into disadvantaged community contexts are associated with higher rates of recidivism” (p. 218). This comes as no surprise considering that nearly half of all inmates in this country are black men. They demonstrated through the stories of two post-incarceration students how living in high crime neighborhoods, while living on a low and fixed income, can create risky temptations that might not exist for someone who is living rent-free in a better environment (Livingston & Miller, 2014). These temptations are a result of being engulfed by an environment that makes it easier to join in on or fall victim to criminal activity as opposed to an environment that allows for growth and prosperity. When someone is surrounded by negative influences it is more risky than being surrounded by positive influences.

## **Impact of Education on Recidivism**

Several scholars have found that education reduces recidivism (e.g.; Escobar et al., 2015; Halkovic, 2014; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr, 2015; Spycher et al., 2012). However, Umoh (2014), found that there was no direct negative impact on recidivism related to education.

In some studies, the positive impact that education has on reducing recidivism can be overstated due to selection bias (Kim & Clark, 2013). Despite the fact that one researcher found no link between education and reduced recidivism in their study and others found that selection bias can skew the results, the positive impacts found by a number of researchers cannot be ignored.

The educational journey can have a major impact on formerly incarcerated people as well as their classmates and others around them. Arroyo (2015) used narratives from formerly incarcerated individuals who had earned degrees to help demonstrate the “transformative power of education to help formerly incarcerated individuals transcend beyond the stigmas and barriers that would otherwise lead them to continue living destructive lives” (p. 116). He found that participants in his study were productive members of their communities who were less likely to recidivate and better prepared for employment due to acquiring a college degree.

Leary (2015) identified “gains in verbal/quantitative/subject competencies and cognitive skills, intellectual growth, moral development, increased financial stability and enhanced quality of life” as individual benefits of higher education (p. 31). These gains combined with new skills and abilities can help break cycles of oppression as new qualifications provide new opportunities for formerly incarcerated people. Livingston & Miller (2014) interviewed a post-incarceration student who told them “this environment is like, I think, it’s key to reentry...’cause not only are you learning, but you’re interacting with people on a positive level, and it’s always positive” (p. 229). This goes to show that for people from disadvantaged backgrounds with a history of incarceration there are not many times or places in which life is not dominated by negativity. College campuses provide that opportunity for positive interactions. While the opportunity for positive interactions does not guarantee that all interactions will be positive it is definitely a good place to start. Halkovic (2014) suggests that “creating a welcoming space in higher education for

people who are returning home from prison not only yields benefits to the affected students, but also challenges commonly held beliefs about the potential of people who have served time” (p. 494). As self-esteem is boosted and potential to do good in the world is realized, society will be forced to acknowledge positive contributions made by this segment of the population.

### **Impact of Education on Identity**

Post-secondary education allows for the development and discovery of personal identity. Arroyo (2015) argues that post-secondary education “leads to changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that allowed [formerly incarcerated individuals] to redevelop social bonds” (p. 128). Leary (2015) suggests that “a liberal education enriches all of life’s relationships and it encourages values of ‘human dignity, equality, justice, responsibility and freedom’” (p. 37). When values, beliefs and behaviors change so does a person’s identity along with them. People who once identified with a street culture and were labeled by themselves and others with terms such as “thug”, “criminal”, “convict”, “inmate” or “deviant” can be seen through a more positive light as they embrace their identity as “students”, “workers”, “volunteers”, “parents”, and “community leaders.” Identity capital, or personal traits and characteristics that make an individual an asset, is built through these changes that take place which then provide a sense of empowerment and a path forward (Livingston & Miller, 2014).

Livingston & Miller (2014) describe situations in which black, Latino and bi-racial students are forced to transform their identities in order to connect with people who can’t relate to their background. Despite the positive changes that take place they found that for blacks and Latinos who go back to bad neighborhoods, with high crime rates, high rates of poverty and little opportunities for growth, getting rid of their street identities was a challenge. Green (2016) spoke of something similar, stating that “W.E.B. Du Bois coined the concept of ‘double



consciousness,' whereby black people are essentially forced to have two identities and pressured to view themselves as they're perceived by their non-black peers" (Green, 2016). These circumstances combine to create the need for resiliency and determination in order to cope with identify issues that arise. Strayhorn et al. (2013) refer to the resiliency of formerly incarcerated students as a "'sixth sense' to persist in the face of obstacles" (p. 89). Those who possess this sixth sense have a much greater chance for success in breaking the cycles of oppression that lead to poverty and recidivism. While unequal systems of oppression are the root cause of these issues it is up to individuals to do what it takes in order to succeed until and unless these systems are broken down.

Halkovic (2014) argues that previously incarcerated college students are challenging perceptions of their social identities when they re-claim new identities as students. She claims that this leads to a discourse of potential they might hold as opposed to the dominant discourse of risk they might pose. Previously incarcerated students might develop new perceptions of what is possible through higher education (Halkovic, 2014). Pursuing an education allows formerly incarcerated people to become role models for anyone who may have come from a disadvantaged background and wishes to change their circumstances as well as for the youth who have dreams of attending college.

### **Impact of Education on Employment**

There is an increasing gap between the wages earned by college graduates and those who only finished high school (Leary, 2015). Although there are racial and gender disparities, these gaps related to education are present regardless of race, ethnicity or gender (Leary, 2015). In addition to higher wages college graduates also have more benefits, greater opportunities and better overall health (Leary, 2015).

Many people who are convicted of crimes have their employment options severely diminished. Livingston and Miller (2014) suggest that formerly incarcerated individuals are relegated to dead-end jobs. However, acquiring a college education will prepare formerly incarcerated people for a career (Arroyo, 2015). According to Arroyo (2015), not only does post-secondary education better prepare formerly incarcerated people for employment but it also gives them an opportunity to compete for higher salaries. Arroyo (2015) also found that educational levels impacted the trajectory of formerly incarcerated people in regards to whether they were on a career path or merely working a profession. He differentiates between the two because a profession is a field in which an individual is trained but a career path, in his opinion, is the pursuit of lifelong ambition. Umoh (2014) adds that it is more likely that someone has the skills required for job acquisition if they have a higher education level.

### **Barriers to Success**

According to Livingston and Miller (2014), “success requires both economic resources and time commitments that place long-term goals ahead of immediate needs” (p. 218). For formerly incarcerated students there are many barriers to success. Many scholars have included barriers to a successful transition from incarceration to higher education in their research (Copenhaver, Edwards-Willey, & Byers, 2007; Escobar et al., 2015; Halkovic, 2014; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

One of the most critical barriers in terms of pursuing an education is background checks. Halkovic and Greene (2015) argue that questions relating to criminal history on college applications “act as a deterrent for potential students who wish to make positive changes in their lives and target students who do not pose a risk to campus security” (p. 31). While results from background checks can be used to bar or exclude people with specific convictions in their

background, even those who wouldn't have been excluded had they gone through the process might exclude themselves from consideration by not applying due to fear of being rejected.

When institutions request background checks it is solely at their discretion as there are no state or federal laws requiring them to do so (McTier Jr., 2015). Through requiring background checks, institutions of higher learning create circumstances that prevent the formerly incarcerated from obtaining educational opportunities and skills that would allow them to overcome their criminal history (Escobar et al., 2015). Halkovic and Greene (2015) acknowledge the fact that “students with race and class privilege may have broken the law, but were never charged, arrested, convicted, indicted or pleaded guilty while students who lack these privileges are more likely to be convicted of similar or lesser offenses” (p. 4). There are people who commit crimes regularly that have never been convicted while there are others who have committed a crime once who were convicted. A person's conviction history tells you very little about their day-to-day behaviors but rather what offenses they have been convicted for. Despite this, many formerly incarcerated people who get into the school despite their criminal history are then placed under special supervision or in special programs despite evidence that proves most crimes on college campuses are committed by first-time offenders (Halkovic, 2014).

Another major barrier to success for formerly incarcerated college students is stigma. Leary (2015) argues that stigma may cause formerly incarcerated students to not attend events related to school that may be helpful to them such as workshops or networking events. Halkovic and Greene (2015) suggests that while stigma has historically been a visible mark, it can also be invisible. They argue that “beyond navigating administrative challenges, after enrollment, students who have spent time in jail or prison must also learn how to negotiate interpersonal stigma (e.g., relationships with classmates and faculty)” (p. 11). This is a process that requires

time and experience. Until situations have arisen and formerly incarcerated college students get a chance to interpret the reactions and responses of their peers in regards to their criminal history it will be hard to get over that stigma.

According to McTier Jr (2015) “stigmas and stereotypes often discourage the individual, leaving them to feel guilty or ashamed of their criminal history” (p. 18). This causes many formerly incarcerated students to not self-disclose. Leary (2015) identified three themes in regards to why the formerly incarcerated don’t self-disclose. These include image maintenance, negative emotions and negative expectations. Image maintenance means they might not self-disclose because they are trying maintain an image, negative emotions pertains to their feelings when talking about their background, and negative expectations pertains to the individual expecting negative consequences as a result of self-disclosing. These themes are not present for everyone, however, as Livingston and Miller (2014) found that formerly incarcerated students from higher socioeconomic status are less likely to internalize their criminality.

Strayhorn et al. (2013) described the label of “ex-offender” as both an impediment as well as a motivation. They found it to be an impediment in the sense that it “negatively affected some peer interactions, limited options for campus involvement, and all-too-often shaped faculty members’ perceptions of the students” (p. 84). The label can be motivation in the sense that it can be “fuel for pursuing their academic goals” (p. 85).

### **Racial Disparities**

Many of the factors related to mass incarceration, recidivism and education involve racial disparities. Several scholars have identified these disparities through their research. Spycher et al. (2012) claims that “young African American men are more likely to be incarcerated than any other segment of the population” (p. 5). McTier Jr (2015) points out that black men are incarcerated at a rate of 3,074 per 100,000 residents compared to only 459 per 100,000 white

men. Nearly one million of the 2.2 million incarcerated people in the United States are black men (Strayhorn et al., 2013).

According to Livingston and Miller (2014), “one facet affecting student success that is shared by disadvantaged students both during and after incarceration is the quality of prior education” (p. 217). Minorities are more likely to have early disruptions in their education and often earn their GED while incarcerated. Research shows that earning a high school diploma, as opposed to obtaining a GED in prison, leads to more positive post-secondary educational outcomes (Livingston & Miller, 2014). Leary (2015) adds that there are gaps related to race in college enrollment and once enrolled, Black and Latino people are less likely to graduate. Green (2016) states that “for minority students, surviving and thriving academically despite multiple encounters with racism or stereotyping may require a different type of resolve than do typical college-student struggles like balancing work and class, or overcoming difficult assignments.” He also argues that college campuses have failed to protect students of color from feeling the effects of societal racism, while at times even exacerbating those effects.

### **Prison-Based vs Post-Release Education**

While most prior research has looked at educating prisoners, the area of focus for this research project is post-release education. Several scholars have written about the differences between obtaining an education while incarcerated compared to joining an actual college campus post-release. According to Spycher et al. (2012), “prisons are more likely to provide vocational training than academic programs” (p.15). They claim that this is partly due to the fact that Pell Grants were eliminated for prison education due to people in power concluding that it was not fair for inmates to earn high-level degrees. A major issue with prison education identified by Spycher et al. (2012) is the fact that prison education programs have low completion rates for

reasons such as being transferred to a new facility or being released. While there are major differences between the settings, Halkovic (2014) highlights the fact that educational experiences in prison can lay the groundwork for higher education being a possibility post-release.

Escobar et al. (2015) claims that “only five percent of incarcerated individuals have access to post-secondary education” (p. 34). Challenges to prison-based education include “limited physical space for hosting classes, security concerns, and lack of qualified instructors” (p. 34). Halkovic (2014) adds that in contrast to college campuses, prison is not a healthy environment.

According to Livingston and Miller (2014), “university attendance, especially in community settings, provides an important avenue for building ties to prosocial people and institutions” (p.216). They suggest that “community-based university attendance also holds the potential to facilitate positive situational aspects of postincarceration change, such as changing routine activities, knitting off former networks, and restricting opportunities for re-offending: time spent on campus is time away from risky situations, people, and places” (p. 216). This is similar to the previous discussion on the impact that post-secondary education can have on formerly incarcerated students but when considered within the context of prison-based vs post-release education we can see why the setting in which a post-secondary education is obtained will impact a person’s day-to-day experiences. While post-secondary education has a positive impact both when based inside of prisons and post-release, the benefits that come from joining college campus communities are unique to pursuing an education post-release. However, the college campus is not risk free and it poses unique risks compared to prison-based educational programs. For example, bearing stigma in the classroom is unique to post-release education

because all classmates in prison-based education programs are convicts (Halkovic & Greene, 2015).

### **Benefits for Others**

College campuses benefit from diversity amongst their student body. Halkovic and Greene (2015) suggests that “the experiences and testimonies of students with documented criminal records are essential gifts . . . for enriching and transforming academic communities” (p. 10). They claim that students with criminal histories bring along with them unique analytical frameworks and knowledge that result from their life experiences. According to Halkovic (2014), when classmates are aware of a formerly incarcerated student’s background it can create a contact zone which is “a space where two groups meet and can engage in dialogue that results in new understandings being developed” (p. 507). Halkovic (2014) also introduced the benefit of conscientization which she defines as “the process of reevaluation and engagement through dialogue” and which she says “allows groups that have been historically oppressed to identify their own potential and to create new identities for themselves, creating positive change for both individuals and communities” (p. 505). She also identifies expert knowledge from lived experiences as a way to improve institutional models. When formerly incarcerated college students engage with their academic communities they are contributing to the enrichment of those around them just as they are being enriched.

Society as a whole benefits when the formerly incarcerated successfully pursue post-secondary education. Many formerly incarcerated students sacrifice careers in higher-paying fields in order to enroll in human services fields that allow them to serve others from disadvantaged backgrounds (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). Leary (2015) also noted the theme amongst formerly incarcerated students whom he interviewed in which “education is not

primarily for personal benefit, but rather for the benefit of others” (p. 149). When people come out of prison and get educated and trained to enter fields in which they serve people with backgrounds similar to theirs it provides unique insights into how to serve those populations from the perspective of someone who has been there.

Additionally, according to Leary (2015), post-secondary education attainment is linked to lower rates of poverty and unemployment which decreases reliance on social safety-net programs and public budgets. Societal benefits also come in the form of decreased tax burdens related to reduced recidivism (Leary, 2015; Spycher et al., 2012).

### **Lack of Post-Release Education Research**

There are a large number of studies on prison-based college programs but there is very little research in regards to the experiences of students in college post incarceration (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2012). Halkovic (2014) adds that although there is much research regarding positive impacts of college within prisons, “less is known about the journey from prison to college” (p. 495). Leary, (2015) agrees, stating that “researchers know much less about offenders entering higher education post-release than those who pursue post-secondary education while incarcerated” (p. 1). He also adds that there is not much research pertaining to how the formerly incarcerated fund their education post-release. Arroyo (2015) suggests that “although it’s slowly gaining interest, research on formerly incarcerated individuals and factors that impact successful reentry are lacking” (p. 138). Livingston and Miller (2014) took this theme even further by claiming “we know of no such research that has investigated the experiences of and challenges faced by students postincarceration in university settings” (p. 218). The workshop that resulted from this project provides an opportunity to conduct further research as participants embark on their academic journey.



## **What we have Learned**

Scholars have concluded that post-secondary education can have a positive impact on reducing the risk of recidivism. However, more research is needed on the experiences of formerly incarcerated college students who attend traditional college classes on traditional college campuses. When people are still incarcerated while pursuing post-secondary education the experience is completely different from that of those who attend college post-release. Most importantly, the challenges and life circumstances that surface for formerly incarcerated students are drastically different than those of students in prison-based programs. Students pursuing post-secondary education while incarcerated have fewer responsibilities outside of their school work and they live a very structured life. Additionally, inmates in prison-based programs do not face the same pressure in regards to supporting themselves financially while avoiding re-incarceration as those who attend college post-release while possibly being on probation.

In order for post-secondary education to play a role in reducing the risk of recidivism, formerly incarcerated college students must be successful in their journey. Simply enrolling in college is not enough. It is through earning a college degree that new doors will be opened. The research question that needs to be answered is “how can formerly incarcerated students successfully make the transition from prison to college?”

## **Contextualizing the Process**

When I started college in 2008 I was a 23-year-old black man who was recently released from prison. I was a member of the group of people that the product of this research project is intended to serve. My experiences and interactions over the past eight years have provided me with not only knowledge about the topic of preventing recidivism through post-secondary education but also with wisdom that can only result from living through and processing experiences. It is my background and experiences which qualify me to use autoethnography in order to create a workshop to help people go from being incarcerated to being successful in college.

Research is not always or often conducted in the way that I chose to conduct my research for this project. However, there is no one correct way of doing things. In the U.S. we rely heavily on what Paulo Freire refers to as the banking concept of education. According to Freire (2000), “the capability of banking education to minimize or annul the student’s creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (p. 73). The idea behind this concept is that professors, or scholars, deposit information into students who then accept those deposits as knowledge. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2008) however, the validation processes that allow claims to pass through this system as knowledge reflects the interests of elite white men who hold positions of power and authority. This can be problematic for people from backgrounds that value lived experiences or wisdom over knowledge gained in other ways such as reading. When facilitating the workshop I will make sure that participants have a voice and the potential to contribute rather than simply receiving information that may or may not be useful to them.

This project was completed using autoethnography as a methodological approach within the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist epistemology is transactional and subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is based on the idea that symbolic procedures construct reality. The structure of reality relies on experiences and interpretations (Jonassen, 1991). The mind is considered to be the conceptual system for constructing reality and it is the “perceiver and interpreter of nature” (Jonassen, 1991, p. 9). Guba and Lincoln suggest that “The basic epistemological assumption of constructivism is transactional subjectivism, that is, that assertions about “reality” and “truth” depend solely on the meaning sets (information) and degree of sophistication available to the individuals and audiences engaged in forming those assertions” (Guba & Lincoln, 2001, p. 1). My life experiences have provided me with specific information and ways of thinking that allow me to determine my reality and truth. It was up to me to determine what was important and what goes into the workshop and workbook.

For this project, the focus is on helping people who were formerly incarcerated be successful in college. My reflection as part of the autoethnographic process was aimed at looking for processes, policies, interactions, resources, and other aspects of my experience that can be pulled from to help guide a broader group of people that share a common background of being a formerly incarcerated college student. While my experiences are not exactly the same as everyone who goes from prison to college, the information that I present to participants from secondary sources applies not only to me, but to anyone trying to make the same transition.

Special care has been taken to ensure that the workshop components that have been pulled from autobiographical material have larger cultural relevance. While autoethnography allowed me to explore my personal experiences, those experiences were explored with the intent of isolating culturally relevant aspects from the personal narrative in order to create the

curriculum for the workshop. The processes that I had to go through in order to enroll in college and the resources that were available to me are not unique to me. All students will need to apply for admission, all students should fill out the FAFSA if eligible, all students coming out of prison will have to determine whether or not to self-disclose, all students coming out of prison will have to manage their time well in order to be successful. While my personal experience is informing these areas of focus, actual content that is delivered to workshop participants in order to prepare them comes from secondary sources that are able to provide information and details that participants need in order to successfully make the transition from prison to college.

Workshop sessions will provide opportunities for participants to look inward at their own needs and life experiences and there will be opportunities for contributions to the group. This will not be a lecture in which I present information that is remembered and then utilized but rather we will explore together ways in which educational and life goals can be met for the participants. The success of participants is in their own hands and they will play an active role in determining what is best for them. My experiences were valuable for determining topics and areas of focus but there is no expectation that my experiences hold all of the answers for everyone.

Although my story is mixed in with the workbook and it helped shape the workshop, this workshop is not focused on telling my story or sharing my experiences. It is focused on helping to shape the experiences of others. While I believe that voice and storytelling can be important parts of an academic process, the goal of this project is for the workshop to be based on my experiences and shaped by my experiences but not about my experiences. My intention for basing the workshop on my experiences is not due to a desire to emphasize story telling as a form of knowledge production but rather to emphasize that researchers from marginalized

backgrounds can analyze their lived experiences, whether success or failure, and use what they learned to help others.

As a black man, as well as a formerly incarcerated college student, I am a part of multiple groups of people that are subordinate within academia. Hill Collins (2008) suggests that subordinate groups, more specifically, black women, often have to rely on alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge (p. 252). This has been problematic as the people in power were able to write off any new claims by saying that the work of black women who used alternative methods “did not constitute credible research” (p. 254). This created situations in which black women scholars held things to be true based on their own standards, which were widely accepted amongst them, that they were unable to legitimate according to the standards of academia. There is a disconnect between African-American thought systems and the processes that lend credibility in academia. In **Black Feminist Thought**, Hill Collins (2008) wrote that, “for most African-American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (p. 257). However, in academia the opposite more often than not seems to be true. One of the benefits of being in an interdisciplinary program that places an emphasis on different ways of knowing is that I am able to invoke scholars such as Hill Collins to demonstrate that I am not alone in my way of thinking which lends credibility to me using my own experiences as a basis for this project.

Although this is an academic project the goal is to help solve the real world problem of recidivism. Not all academic work is aimed at solving problems or leading to action. The ways in which we go about doing things are impacted by our goals. The value of having people with lived experiences involved in strategizing and solving problems was emphasized in a recent

article by Amy Sawyer on the website for the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. The article was a call to “stay away from conventional ideas like asking people to simply share their story –highlighting the most traumatic parts for a passive audience—and instead, pushing ourselves to find out how to generate meaningful input and facilitate active dialogue that focuses on recommendations, strategies, and solutions” (Sawyer, 2016). This article really resonated with me because I have observed situations in which people in privileged positions often find the stories of those who are less fortunate fascinating. Even if they have compassion and feel a need to help, there is often a big emphasis on storytelling and it’s almost as if our misfortune is a form of entertainment. There are countless stories out there. What we need is for these stories to translate into making the world a better place by digging deeper than the story and getting into insights and conclusions from those who lived the story.

When it comes to what we learn from research processes, who we are as researchers matters. Renato Rosaldo suggests that when researchers are positioned subjects they “grasp certain human phenomena better than others” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 19). He suggests that life experiences determine the particular types of insight we have. According to Rosaldo, researchers as positioned subjects occupy “a position or structural location and observe with a particular angle of vision” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 19). It is my positionality as a black man from a disadvantaged background who was formerly incarcerated that shaped my structural location and angle of vision while navigating the complex systems of higher education. My positionality allows me to look retrospectively at my experiences and analyze them in order to help people who have similar backgrounds do what I have done in transitioning from being incarcerated to being successful in college. While the process of looking inward to gain knowledge may not be valued by many, Rosaldo argues that the dominant conceptions of truth and objectivity are being

challenged by truths “that are embedded in local contexts, shaped by local interests, and colored by local perceptions” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 21).

These local contexts, interests and perceptions essentially lead to alternative histories. Who we are changes how we experience and perceive the world around us. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “to hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges” (Smith, 1999, p. 34). When we experience and perceive the world around us differently than others then what we consider knowledge, truth or reality will vary depending on our circumstances. Smith adds that “the pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things” (Smith, 1999, p. 34). When we have people with different backgrounds and different knowledge bases conducting research those differences lead to different approaches. Alternative knowledges lead to alternative thoughts, alternative values, alternative interpretations and that makes all of the difference in the world in terms of how people who have been in the shoes of those who they are trying to serve will approach that task.

In this section I have provided examples of scholars who think outside of the box and value different ways of conducting research and different ways of knowing. These scholars acknowledge the special positionality that people who are typically under-represented in academic circles can hold when they become researchers. There are benefits to allowing researchers to tap into their own cultural beliefs, their own experiences and their own ways of doing things. It is not enough to simply allow in a small number of minorities and claim diversity. True diversity in academia will not only involve having a few non-white students in each class. True diversity in academia means not only opening up seats in classrooms but also opening the minds of the controlling elite and allowing people from different backgrounds to have the freedom to conduct research in ways that are true to who they are and true to who and

what they are studying. I am very grateful to have studied in a graduate program that not only allows different ways of knowing but also promotes different ways of knowing.



### **Creating the Curriculum**

The process began with reviewing literature related to preventing recidivism through post-secondary education. The review of the literature revealed the need for more qualitative research involving the experiences of formerly incarcerated college students as they pursue an education following release from incarceration.

Autoethnography was chosen as the method of data collection and it is also a part of the final product as my personal narrative (with cultural connections) was woven into the workbook that is given to workshop participants. Primary data collection began with journaling and reflection on the experience of my transition from incarceration to being a successful college student. Notes and reflections were combined with textual artifacts from my time as a college student to complete the primary data collection portion of this project. Textual artifacts included academic work, free-writing, reflections and correspondences with faculty. There was no specific amount of time or number of pages that I would write at any moment during the reflection process. Over 60 pages of data was collected in around one month with reflective writing taking place daily.

The primary data were coded using an online qualitative research platform called Dedoose. Coding was necessary in order to take my personal experiences and group theme into themes that have larger cultural implications that could be addressed within the curriculum. Areas of focus that were identified through the analysis and coding of the data include **qualifications for authority, prison-based vs post-release education, Problems with academia, motivation to change, positive outlook/attitude, accomplishment, organization, things to avoid, how I succeed, goals, work ethic, support network, childhood trouble, things to know, values, employment, time management, adversity, resilience, transformation, stigma, barriers, stability, identity, responsibility, resources, disclosure,**

**criminality, transportation, exposure to new things, advantages of background, double consciousness, and diversity and exposure to new crowd.** While these areas of focus are based on my personal experiences they provide a framework of what needs to be covered in the workshop in order to help others successfully transition from prison to college.

The next step in the analysis was to determine which areas of focus are related. Using Dedoose, I was able to determine which themes were co-occurring within my personal experience of transitioning from incarceration to being successful in college. The most common co-occurring themes were *stigma* and *disclosure*, *stigma* and *identity*, *identity* and *disclosure*, *things to avoid* and *barriers*, *things to know* and *identity*, *stigma* and *barriers*, *identity* and *barriers* and *time management* and *organization*. Determining which topics surface together in my experiences helped with planning and organizing the workshop content, structure and sequence.

After identifying topics and areas of focus, secondary sources were used to develop the content of the curriculum, workshop and workbook. Content that is presented to workshop participants does not come directly from the primary data or my experiences. My experiences informed areas of focus while the actual content came from Tacoma Community College website as well as FAFSA.gov, scholarly and non-academic articles, YouTube, and various other internet resources. While my personal experiences don't contain the important information, policies and procedures that a formerly incarcerated college prospect might need in order to get started and be successful, the secondary sources provided just that. Workshop sessions are not focused on my experiences, they are focused on helping others make the transition from prison to college successfully.

After completing the curriculum, which is the overall plan for the workshop, the workbook and workshop presentations were completed. For each session of the workshop there is a corresponding chapter in the workbook and a PowerPoint presentation. After completing the curriculum, workbook and presentations, the project was complete and the workshop could be facilitated.

## **From Lived Experience to Workshop Curriculum**

### **Analysis**

The completion of this project required analysis every step of the way. Due to the unique nature of this project, a pragmatic, or practical as opposed to theoretical, approach to analysis has been taken. The process began with various forms of writing about my experience transitioning from incarceration to being successful in college. Analysis began before the first word was written. Not everything I experienced 24 hours per day, 365 days per year was relevant or useful so in order to write about my experiences, I first had to select experiences to write about. This form of analysis was done internally and subconsciously throughout the entire process. Every time I wrote about my experiences during the month-long data collection process I had to be selective with what I wrote about.

The next form of analysis was conducted using Dedoose, an online qualitative research platform. The data collected through autoethnography was coded based on themes or topics that were discussed within each excerpt. The data were read line-by-line and if the content fit within a certain theme it was coded under that theme. Coding analysis also involved determining co-occurring themes within my experiences.

The next form of analysis involved moving from these codes/themes and excerpts to objectives for the workshop. The codes helped with organization, grouping and sequence while the excerpts helped determine objectives. The use of a pragmatic approach to completing this project allowed for the flexibility to use common-sense to determine what should be included in the curriculum for the workshop. For example, during the data collection process I wrote about consequences that I faced for applying for financial aid too late. It was obvious, based on my experiences, that financial aid policies, processes and deadlines are something that should be

covered in the workshop. Once the objectives were identified, a pragmatic approach of analysis was then taken in order to choose which content would best allow objectives to be met.

The goals and objectives of the workshop and workbook are directly related to the lived experiences uncovered through the research process. The topics include **The Transformative Nature of Post-Secondary Education, Leaving the Criminal Lifestyle Behind, Community Resources, Academic and Career Options, Financial Aid, College Life, Being a Felon on Campus, Facing Adversity, Doing School Work, and Bringing it all Together**. Within the major topics, each areas of focus is addressed through secondary content that helps reach the workshop objectives.

### **Connection between Data, Coding and Curriculum**

The following is an excerpt from the data:

**As a formerly incarcerated college student we can often be our own worst enemy. There are ways that we create invisible barriers for ourselves out of thin air. Even though these barriers are invisible they are still very real as long as we make them real. If we fear self-disclosure we might be robbing ourselves of the most beneficial and influential material that we have to work with.**

The above excerpt was coded through Dedoose under **barriers, disclosure, identity, things to avoid, and advantages of background**. The excerpt was coded under **barriers** and **disclosure** because it speaks directly about those areas of focus. It was coded under **identity** because this excerpt points to the idea of embracing one's identity. It was coded under **things to avoid** because it touches on fear of self-disclosure and creating invisible barriers. It was coded under **advantages of background** because it speaks to the way that formerly incarcerated

students can provide great benefit to others and have a positive influence on both their peers and others who might come from a similar background when they self-disclose.

While the participants in the workshop will never see the excerpt, it plays a role in shaping the objectives for workshop participants. Participants learn about barriers, the potential benefits of embracing their identity which allows for more confident self-disclosure and how to avoid getting in their own way. Stories will be told and examples will be given during facilitation of the workshop but the curriculum focuses on shaping the experiences of others rather than sharing my experiences. Workshop content relating to creating our own barriers would not exist had the pragmatic analysis of the data not revealed a need for this to be an area of focus.

### **Why these topics?**

The areas of focus in this workshop are aimed at providing useful information that is applicable a larger group of people. However, there will be unique individuals who participate in these workshops and they should play a major role in determining what is best for them. This workshop will not be approached as if the facilitator has all the answers but rather we will explore the possibilities together. Workshop participants will constantly be asked to think and reflect and share their thoughts with the group and I will learn as much from them as they learn from me. Sessions and topics can and will be adjusted along the way in order to accommodate unforeseen needs of workshop participants.

The first session of the workshop is on the transformative nature of post-secondary education. This session is designed to be an introduction to the workshop. At the end of this session students will be able to name other workshop participants, describe ways in which post-secondary education can be transformative, match various academic disciplines with their

descriptions and name people who came before them who have successfully transitioned from prison to college and beyond.

The idea for this session came from my own transformative experience. Enrolling in college has had an impact on my life in numerous ways. I have noticed changes in my attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, values, and work ethic. These changes that take place are great benefits for people such as myself who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and might not have been in many positive environments previously.

The second session is on leaving the criminal lifestyle behind. This is a critical element of any successful transition from prison to college. Preventing recidivism is what this project is all about and in order to prevent recidivism participants must leave the criminal lifestyle behind them. At the end of this session participants will be able to describe the circumstances that lead to their incarceration, identify people and places to avoid in order to prevent recidivism, differentiate between positive and negative influences and demonstrate a change in attitudes and behaviors that could lead to recidivism.

In order for me to be successful I had to completely turn my life around. Living a criminal lifestyle is not compatible with being a college student. I had to avoid going around certain people and certain places in order to avoid being caught up in any trouble. When I was released from prison I had a new perspective on money and material things and this led to changed attitudes and behaviors which allowed me to put my focus into school.

The third session of the workshop is about community resources. There are resources out there but people cannot take advantage of them if they are unaware. At the end of this session participants will be able to match organizations with resources provided, identify which resources they need and qualify for, and ultimately apply for and utilize resources.

When I got out of prison I was dead broke and had nothing. In order to survive I had to rely on various organizations for support. I received support with food, housing, clothing, transportation, hygiene products, childcare, cash and more. Without tapping into these resources it would have been much more difficult if not impossible for me to succeed. Based on my experiences, formerly incarcerated college students should be aware of the resources at their disposal.

Session four pertains to academic and career options. All potential college students should know their options but for many people coming out of prison, especially those who are going to be first-generation college students, this information has not been made available to them. At the end of this session participants will be able to list potential careers, identify barriers/weaknesses, identify advantages/strengths, describe the pros and cons of potential paths, differentiate between realistic and unrealistic possibilities, choose a degree program, and ultimately apply for admission to Tacoma Community College.

When I came to college I had no idea what my options were in terms of academically or professionally. I had no idea which types of degrees translate to which types of careers. I had no idea what various academic disciplines focused on. I ended up picking an academic program that directly related to a profession that I had heard of and had an interest in. The problem is that my sights were set too low and I was unaware of other options. I was unaware of the types of careers my background would be an issue for. Had I participated in a workshop session like this one before I started college I might not have wasted three years of my life earning a degree for a field I wouldn't end up working in.

The fifth session is on financial aid. Financial aid can be very beneficial as it is the only avenue for many formerly incarcerated college students to attend college but it also can be the



cause of much worry and concern. At the end of this session participants will be able to match types of aid to their description, review the requirements for eligibility, identify scholarship opportunities, and ultimately apply for financial aid at Tacoma Community College.

I have been a financial aid recipient every year that I have been a college student. Financial aid is what made this journey possible for me. I learned in my very first quarter that meeting deadlines and requirements is extremely important and can cost you thousands of dollars if the process is not followed correctly. I have had many experiences with financial aid including applying for aid year after year, visiting the financial aid office to address concerns, and working in financial aid as a student assistant. As someone who owes over \$100,000 in student loans I can speak on both the gifts and the curses of financial aid.

The sixth session of the workshop is on the college life. More specifically, it is about navigating the campus, utilizing campus resources, and managing time wisely. These are important aspects of any successful journey from prison to college. At the end of this session participants will be able to match campus organizations with their functions, identify ways in which they can get involved on campus, match campus resources with their functions, match essential campus departments with their functions, and organize their daily activities in a productive manner.

Learning how to live life as a college student is not as easy for some as it is for others. For people coming from prison it can be a difficult adjustment. I would often come to class and leave without taking advantage of what the campus had to offer. I didn't know about or utilize many resources that were available to me. One of my biggest regrets is not being more involved on campus. I am not a traditional student so I know that my experience wouldn't and shouldn't be the same as someone coming right out of high school but there definitely were ways that I

could have and should have engaged with my campus community more. For example, I could have attended more events or joined a club.

Living life as a college student is a lot different than life for most other people. If someone works a normal job they usually go to work for a specified amount of time and once they clock out their job is done until they return. When you are living the college life it's not like that. The majority of my time spent on college is outside the classroom. When I am at home I have responsibilities for school. When I am at work I am handling responsibilities for school. A successful transition from prison to college involves managing daily activities in a productive matter to ensure that there is time for school responsibilities.

Session seven is on being a felon on campus. Although convicted felon is not written on our foreheads, we might still see impacts related to our criminal history. At the end of this session participants will be able to define stigma, choose the appropriate times to self-disclose, explain how their background informs their contributions and views and define themselves in positive terms.

This session is all about not letting guilt, shame, micro-aggressions, and stigma prevent participants from being successful. At times I have been in classrooms with people who didn't know my background but made negative comments about people with backgrounds similar to mine. I chose to take classes such as psychology of law, children of incarcerated parents, and police and society where I have had things in common with the topic of the day and had to hear some pretty brutal views shared. Although my classmates wouldn't have suspected that someone with a background such as the one they are shaming would be their peer it still has an impact on me. The most recent occurrence of this happening was in one of my graduate classes when I was discussing this project and mentioned that prisoners have a right to education. One of my

classmates who did not yet know my background said that he doesn't agree and expressed views that essentially equate to him saying that I have no business in the classroom with him.

One of the most important aspects of this session is that people don't need to live in fear of being found out. Embracing their history and using their background to make a difference can be a great thing. I didn't make a lot of friends in college and I was scared of how I would be received but for the most part people who know about my background have been supportive of me and actually seem to admire the fact that I have succeeded despite my background.

The eighth session is about facing adversity. Retention is a huge concern with the population that this workshop is designed to help. Knowing how to deal with adversity when it arises, regardless of which type, is key to completing a college degree for formerly incarcerated people. At the end of this session participants will be able to define resiliency, solve problems that arise effectively, describe processes and policies related to changes in registration, match campus resources and departments with their functions, and differentiate between real and perceived barriers.

I have not had a smooth ride through college. My time in college has been far more difficult than my time in prison. Since I started college I have lost four of the six closest people to me in the world to an early death. I have had transportation issues arise. I have had to deal with being on probation. I have had a child hospitalized. I have had four children since I started college. I have constantly had to dig deep and keep fighting even when I didn't want to. I have had to read, write, talk, drive, listen and other things when I would rather be sleeping or ignoring my responsibilities. Adversity will come in various shapes and forms, this session is designed to help people making the transition from prison to college be prepared to fight through it.

The ninth session in the workshop is on doing school work. Many of the people who go from prison to college have had long gaps in their education. Many are first generation college students. Many do not know what to expect in terms of school work. At the end of this session participants will be able to define plagiarism, match popular software titles and online platforms to their uses, list popular citation styles, explaining the grading scale at TCC, choose appropriate sources for papers, and describe various types of potential assignments.

As a first generation college student I never had anyone talk to me about what to expect in terms of doing school work. I had to learn everything as I went along. With me not really going to high school much I was not used to doing school work. When I first started I had no idea what plagiarism was, I had no idea that I shouldn't quote Wikipedia and I had no clue what citations were. It would have been nice to see sample exams, syllabi, and written assignments. I was able to learn as I went along but quite a bit of my classmates came in already having an awareness of these things. I felt like, and I also truly was at a disadvantage.

The tenth session of the workshop is a conclusion. This is where participants will be set to begin their journey. At the end of this session participants will be able to explain their plans for the immediate future and actually get started. They will have applied for financial aid and admission at this point and likely awaiting the results.

This conclusion session will tie everything together. I am hoping that participants will network with each other and lean on each other as a support group. It is also my hope that participants will agree to be interviewed down the road in order to gather more qualitative data on the transition from prison to college.

## **Conclusion**

The intended goal of this workshop is preventing recidivism through post-secondary education. The workshop addresses transformative nature of post-secondary education, lifestyles that lead to incarceration, resources, career options, financial aid, college life, being a felon on campus, facing adversity and doing school work. At the end of the workshop participants will have completed various steps required to enroll in college and been exposed to information that can help them succeed along the way.

This topic is important because many of the people who find themselves trapped in cycles of incarceration, release and recidivism often come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Post-secondary education is a way to change the circumstances and outlook for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many people who have been released from prison and see college as a way to change their circumstances will be first-generation college students and they often will lack the experiences, exposure and support that traditional college students have had access to. There are benefits for the individual participants, educational institutions, classmates, as well as society as a whole. This is a way to motivate and prepare an under-served population that could not only further their own development, but also then go on to help others.

Through this workshop participants will go through the process of applying for financial aid, applying for admission, and more. While information is critical the most important aspect of this workshop is the call to action. The goal is to take attending college from being a goal or a dream to being a reality. Furthermore, the goal is to use college as a tool to change life circumstances that lead to cycles of poverty and incarceration.

One of the great benefits that comes from a program like this is it could potentially help fill a gap in qualitative research. In the literature review it was mentioned that several scholars

believe there is a lack of post-release research on formerly incarcerated college students. One of the causes of that lack of research is a lack of access to this population for various reasons. It is a goal of mine to get interested participants to participate in various forms of follow-ups for data collecting purposes as they progress in their journey as college students. Ideally, this would lead to several qualitative accounts of the lived experience of transitioning from prison to college.

Workshops will be facilitated at Tacoma Community College to start but there is likely to be widespread need and interests in such a workshop. In the future this workshop could be offered at various community colleges in the state as well as potentially at the Washington State Department of Corrections facilities. The target audience for this workshop is people who were released from prison for the first time following the completion of a sentence for a non-violent crime. People who have been convicted of violent crimes or have served multiple prison sentences would be ineligible. People with a history of violence are ineligible because we want to keep college campuses safe and people with multiple stays in prison are ineligible because the goal of the workshop is to prevent first-time offenders from becoming recidivist. Our hope is that the experience of being sent to prison for the first time would provide the motivation to avoid recidivism and to take full advantage of an opportunity to pursue an education.

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